

Soldotna Area Christmas Bird Count slated for Saturday, December 19, 2009

by Elizabeth Jozwiak



The 110th annual Christmas Bird Count season is under way; tens of thousands of volunteer birders are scouring their designated areas in over 2000 circles this Holiday season throughout North America. Once again local birders from the Kenai/Soldotna area are invited to participate in the Soldotna Annual Christmas Bird Count to be held tomorrow.

The Audubon Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is an early-winter nationwide bird census, where volunteers follow specified routes through a designated 15-mile (24-km) diameter circle, counting every bird they see or hear all day. It's not just a species tally—all birds are counted all day, giving an indication of the total number of birds in the circle that day.

All individual CBC's across North America, including Canada, are conducted in the period between Dec. 14 to Jan. 5 each year, and each count is conducted in one calendar day in a given area. Birders from Seward, Anchorage, Homer, and other areas of Alaska also participate in this annual event.

The history of how the Christmas Bird Count began is quite interesting! The CBC began over a century ago when 27 conservationists in 25 localities, led by scientist and writer Frank Chapman, changed the course of ornithological history.

On Christmas Day in 1900, the small group posed

an alternative to the "side hunt," a Christmas day activity in which teams competed to see who could shoot the most birds and small mammals. Instead, Chapman proposed that they identify, count, and record all the birds they saw, founding what is now considered to be the world's most significant citizen-based conservation effort—and a more than century-old institution.

Since Chapman's retirement in 1934, new generations of observers have performed the modern-day count. Today, over 55,000 volunteers from all 50 states, every Canadian province, parts of Central and South America, Bermuda, the West Indies, and Pacific Islands, count and record every individual bird and bird species seen in a specified area.

The data collected by observers on these Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts over the past century have allowed researchers, conservation biologists, and interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America. Christmas bird count data are now being used to see how birds may be reacting to global climate change.

In a recent Refuge Notebook article, biologist Dawn Magness reported on how birds are now wintering in places they rarely did before. The Christmas count data are valuable for detecting changes in bird distributions because these observations now provide over a century of long-term data. Some species of birds are now being seen further North in the winter months as milder temperatures become more common.

The Soldotna Christmas Bird Count originated in 1983 with the center of the 15-mile diameter circle being the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge headquarters and covering most of the Soldotna area, including a good stretch of the lower and middle Kenai River.

Although the count was discontinued in 1992, it restarted in 1999 and has been running ever since with the dedication of local birder Jack Sinclair, who has been the Audubon local compiler of the data each year.

Some of the more common birds seen during the Soldotna CBC have been the Bald Eagle, Black-billed Magpie, Common Raven, Common Redpoll, Pine Grosbeak, Pine Siskin and Boreal and Black-

capped Chickadee.

An unusual sighting during last year's 2008 count was an adult Slaty-backed Gull spotted at the Soldotna Landfill. This Asiatic species has been recorded on the last four consecutive CBC's. Other "seldom seen" species included a Boreal Owl and two Northern Hawk Owls. Toby Burke also glimpsed a small flock of at least seven Horned Larks which were observed scattered within a flock of Snow Buntings on the Kenai Flats during the CBC last year.

Birders, or anyone interested in participating in this year's Christmas bird count, should meet at the Kaladi Brothers Coffee on Kobuk Street in Soldotna at 9:00 am so that birding groups can be assembled and observation areas assigned.

CBC participants are organized into groups—or field parties—by the organizer or compiler of each Count. Each field party covers a specific area of the 15-mile diameter circle on a specific route. Inexperienced birders will be grouped with more seasoned CBC veterans to help familiarize them with where to go and what to look for.

For anyone wanting to pre-register, or just interested in the Christmas Bird Count, there is a wealth of information available online at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/>, or on the local Keen Eye Peninsula Birders website at: <http://www.keeneyebirders.org>.

Each participant should dress warmly, and try to bring a good set of binoculars and a bird identification book for species most often found in Alaska. You may also want to bring a camera to document any rare or unusual sightings. There is a \$5 fee per field participant which will help defray the cost of production and publication of the 110th Christmas Bird Count issue of *American Birds*.

Anyone having an active bird feeder in the count area is also encouraged to help. Counting the single highest number of a species at a feeder at any one time, including any unique feathered visitors, is a big help to the count. All you will need to do is contact the local compiler so that you may report your results on the Count Day. No fees are charged for persons under 18 years of age, or for those planning to survey their backyard bird feeders during the Christmas Bird Count.

Participants do not have to be experts, but only have a desire to get outside and look for birds. The birding effort normally concludes at dusk (about 4 pm) or when weather precludes any measurable returns.

After a great day of birding, all participants are invited to submit their tally sheets and birding photos during a potluck social at 6:00 pm hosted by the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. This potluck will be at the Refuge's Environmental Education log cabin located next door to the Kenai NWR headquarters/parking lot on Ski Hill Road. Please bring a dish to share.

For more information, contact Toby Burke at the Kenai NWR 262-7021 or Jack Sinclair at 262-7817. If you come across a chickadee or northwestern crow with a deformed bill, please report it to USGS—Alaska Science Center on-line automated reporting system at http://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/landbirds/beak_deformity/index.html. This information will contribute to an important regional study on the causes of bill deformities in Alaska birds.

Liz Jozwiak is a wildlife biologist for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. To report unusual bird sightings or hear what local birders have been seeing, call the Central Peninsula Bird Hotline at 262-2300. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.